CONNECTING UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS) WITH GLOBAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT: *This paper looks at the nexus between the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and global learning in the area of English teaching to explore how the Sustainable Development Goals influence learning outcomes of the English language programs to foster responsible citizenship. In addition, the paper looks at how SDGs could be used mould curricular and co-curricular experiences for students learning English language. Focus will also be made on the opportunities that have been availed by the SDGs to synthesize learning across the educational experience in place-based and virtual learning environments. The paper will wrap up by delving on how language programs institutions utilize SDGs so that students learning English concentrate on addressing world challenges meaningfully. The argument in this paper takes into account that "the impact of English as a global language in many spheres of international life has been both rapid and dramatic" (Wong & Dubey-Jhaveri, 2015, p. 1).*

KEY WORDS: Sustainable development goals, United Nations, global learning, English Language, learning, teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable Development Goals that were introduced by the United Nations in 2015 to, among other goals, eradicate poverty, improve health and wellness, reduce inequalities, promote economic development and decent work, as well as engender lifelong learning and quality education, play a pivotal role in improving the wellbeing of people on earth. Global learning, especially the teaching and learning of the English language, provides the nexus to the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals while the SDGs have also shaped the curricular, pedagogy, practice, policies and instructional methods in English Language Teaching. The end result has been the creation of global competence through Global Citizenship Education as the English language has become the global language and medium of instruction in most countries. Furthermore, responsible citizenship has been greatly promoted through English language teaching as the emphasis has been on the promotion of sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity. SDGs have led to the development (or increased use in the case of models that existed before 2015) of a smorgasbord of models, such as the OECD PISA Global Competence Assessment Model, the Intercultural Communicative Competence Model, English as an International Language, and sustainable models of development, among others.

Sustainable Development Goals and Global Learning

The United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals were adopted in 2015 by the General Assembly as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which seeks to transform

the world by achieving sustainable development for all (United Nations, 2021). The SDGs have the capability to create a better world by 2030 by addressing a number of issues such as eradication of poverty, fighting inequality and taming climate change, among other issues (UN, 2021). The Education 2030 Agenda is part of the quest to eradicate poverty through the Sustainable Development Goals and Goal 4 specifically aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (Rickman & Gardiner, 2017).

It is generally accepted that the global education system should engender new and relevant skills, values and attitudes that promote sustainable and responsible communities that "respond to pressing need by defining relevant learning objectives and learning contents, introducing pedagogies that empower learners, and urging their institutions to include sustainability principles in their management structures" (Rickman & Gardiner, 2017, p. 1). The Sustainable Development Goals can thus be utilized to frame disciplinary and interdisciplinary explorations in order to provide students with chances to learn from a wide array of models to solve global challenges.

English Language Teaching, Learning, Programs & Institutions

Most English programs provide rich curriculum that is premised on face-to-face instruction or virtual teaching in areas such as "grammar, reading, writing [and] communication skills", among others (University of Central Florida [UCF] Global, 2021). At Boston University, for instance, the Center for English Language & Orientation (CELOP) focuses on assisting students and professionals to enhance their English and appreciation of the American culture (Boston University, 2021). The importance of English language programs in this globalized world where people have to network and interact mainly through English as a global language cannot be overemphasized (Rao, 2019). This was succinctly captured by Rao (2019) as follows:

> In the twenty-first century, the entire world has become narrow, accessible, sharable and familiar for all the people living on this earth as English is used a s a common language even though there are some variations in habits, cultures, traditions, regions and idiosyncratic aspects (Rao, 2019, p. 1).

This implies that English language education (ELE) is becoming very topical, taking into account that the language has become the "world's foremost lingua franca" (Wong & Dubey-Jhaveri, 2015). For ELE to be effective, the programs should take into cognizance the linguistic and diversity in order to come up with curriculum, pedagogy, practices and policies that appeal to the globalized world and also address "emerging issues in English teaching and learning in different environments around the world" (Wong & Dubey-Jhaveri, 2015). This is in consonance with the observation by Vodopija-Krstanovic and Marinac (2019) who highlighted that English as an International Language (EIL) has attracted a lot of attention with regards to methodologies and pedagogies for English language teaching (ELT), TESOL and SLA in light of the popularity of the language in multilingual settings for communication.

SDGs & Curricular & Co-Curricular Experiences for English Language Students

Sustainable Development Goals could be used to shape curricular and co-curricular experiences for students learning the English language in a myriad of ways. One of the 17 SDGs focuses on 'quality education' in recognition of the quintessential reality that no country can attain development without quality education (Allam, 2017). The SDG on quality education can thus mould the curricular and co-curricular platforms for students as quality has been defined by the American Society for Quality Control (1990) cited in Allam (2017) as "the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs" (p. 20329).

This dovetails with the definition of quality education as the type of education that "necessitates, at a minimum that learners develop foundational literacy and numeracy skills as building blocks for further learning, as well as higher-order skills" (Education 2030 Framework for Action, 2015). SDG's emphasis on quality education has seen the rise of the global movement called the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which advocates for a quality education throughout the world through novel teaching and learning policies and practices (Allam, 2017). This applies to English teaching and learning as well and the ultimate objective of this movement is to create diverse mechanisms of creating a learning society where there is collective learning and cross-pollination of ideas (United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, 2009 cited in Allam, 2017). In order to achieve the ideals of ESD, rapid transformation is being done within the education fraternity, including English language programs, as the models that were in place before the introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals did not support sustainable models of development (Allam, 2017). This paradigm shift in the curriculum of English language teaching and learning was captured as follows:

> We currently live in an age where, in many different countries and contexts, a standardised approach to schooling, including ELT, is increasingly the norm. This is typically characterised by low-risk, discrete-item teaching, frequent testing and dependence on measurable results and outcomes. By introducing children to the Global Goals as part of foreign language lessons, we can redress this balance and integrate a more holistic, personalised approach to children's education into our classroom practice (Maley & Peachey, 2017, p. 11).

On the flip side, quality education itself can be a catalyst for the attainment of SDGs, particularly in the areas of good health; gender equality (SDG 5); clean water and sanitation; clean energy; good jobs and economic growth (SDG 8); and infrastructure development, among others (Allam, 2017). Furthermore, quality education and lifelong learning are regarded as vital cogs for the achievement of other SDGs such as responsible consumption and production (SDG 12); and climate change mitigation (SDG 13) (English & Carlsen, 2019).

Goal Number 4 seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, which implies that the provision of universal primary and secondary education, access to affordable vocational training and higher education to all children is the Achilles heel for this goal (United Nations Development Program, n.d.). The influence of SDG 4 on the practice and policy of English language learning was instantly felt

in 2015 when the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) complemented UN's efforts by identifying lifelong learning as a central element of UNESCO's new agenda - the Education 2030 Framework for Action (FFA), and the agency has "worked to promote lifelong learning as an integral part of the SDGs" since then (English & Carlsen, 2019, p. 206).

As a result of the Incheon Declaration and the FFA, a total of 10 targets and global metrics were formulated to track progress in countries, taking into consideration national and cultural differences but the essence of this development is that English language curriculum and co-curriculum activities that students undertake are benchmarked and quality-checked to ensure that they conform to international best practice and the dictates of SDG 4 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2016; English & Carlsen, 2019). For instance, Mackiewicz (n.d.) highlighted that lifelong learning and language learning were clearly put in the fourth objective of the Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the European Year of Languages with a view to attaining the following:

> … to encourage the lifelong learning of languages, where appropriate, starting at preschool and primary school age and related skills involving the use of languages for specific purposes, particularly in a professional context by all persons residing in the Member States, whatever their age, background, social situation and previous educational experience and achievements (Mackiewicz, n.d., p. 1).

The important role that curriculum plays in English language education can be inferred from the definition of curriculum by Tanner and Tanner (1980) as "the planned and guided learning experiences and intended outcomes, formulated through the systematic reconstruction of knowledge and experiences under the auspices of the school, for learners' continuous and wilful growth in personal social competence" (p. 13). In this regard, SDGs influence the curriculum by determining what students should know in the form of knowledge and content; the relevant skills that the students must acquire in line with the 17 SDGs, the instruction methods to be employed; how the learning outcomes are assessed; as well as the organization of the education system in general (Monk, 1990; Sharmila's Teaching and Learning Journey, n.d.).

SDG 4's thrust on promoting lifelong learning and quality education shapes students' experiences in English learning, especially in developing and poor countries or those countries that are emerging from civil wars. For instance, in his chapter entitled 'English as a tool for conflict transformation', Kennett (2011) highlighted the role that English plays in Sri Lanka following the cessation of the civil strife as government troops are not fluent in Tamil (the indigenous language), refugees are not conversant with Sinhala (another indigenous language) hence the need for all parties to speak in English. As a result, an English language teaching program was rolled out, aptly called Skills through English for Public Servants (STEPS) and its curriculum was anchored on encouraging communication among civil servants, non-governmental organizations, and members of the public (Kennett, 2011).

In the same vein, most developing countries have adopted English teaching and learning as a tool for international development in line with Sustainable Development Goals on the

eradication of poverty. As a result, students undergoing English language learning are exposed to curricular that has its roots in the "ideology [that] takes as self-evident the idea that competence in English can be equated with economic or social development, even though the precise nature of that relationship is often unclear" (Coleman, 2011).

In countries such as India, the tradition has always been that the teaching and learning of English language was held in high esteem and depicting people's aspirations for quality in education to such an extent that a temple was erected for the 'English Goddess' in Utah Pradesh, and this development has been further entrenched by the promulgation of Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal Number 4 (Coleman, 2011). The agenda for global education thus seeks to achieve sustainable development in three critical areas namely, economic, social and environmental and most countries that are signatories to the agenda are changing their curricular, pedagogy, practices and policies to achieve the goals (United Nations, 2015; Amin & Greenwood, 2018).

With the coming on board of SDGs, the wide chasm in English language learning – where children from poor backgrounds were not exposed to the language during the early ages while those from middle and upper class backgrounds – is being assuaged through the education for all philosophy that underpins the Education 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2021). In Bangladesh, for instance, it has been noted that the paucity of trained teachers militates against the attainment of the goal of quality education for all hence the selection, recruitment, training and development of secondary school English teachers has been influenced by the onset of the Sustainable Development Goals as teachers are now being trained in the use of multi-media equipment in line with the communicative approach adopted by government (Amin & Greenwood, 2018; UN, 2015).

The same scenario is occurring in Vietnam where the government successfully incorporated Sustainable Development Goals into national plans and this has seen the launch of novel communication tactics in schools as a way of empowering students in marginalized areas to complete their education (United Nations, 2021b). This has improved school enrolment levels within the country as the poor and marginalized communities have been afforded an opportunity to send their children to school and the support from non-governmental organizations such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) have been instrumental in ensuring the attainment of the goal that all girls and boys should finish free primary and secondary education by 2030 (UNDP, 2021). In sub-Saharan Africa, the SDGs have seen figures for primary school enrolment surging to 91 percent and this compares favourably from the rise from 52 percent in 1990 to 78 percent in 2012 (United Nations Development Program, 2021).

This is in consonance with the proclamation by the UN General Assembly to extricate the people of this planet from poverty as follows:

> We commit to providing inclusive and equitable quality education at all levels – early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary, technical and vocational training. All people , irrespective of sex, age, race or ethnicity, and persons with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples, children and youth, especially those in vulnerable situations,

should have access to life-long learning opportunities that help them acquire the knowledge and skills needed to exploit opportunities and to participate fully in society. We will strive to provide children and youth with a nurturing environment for the full realization of their rights and capabilities, helping our countries to reap the demographic dividend, including through safe schools and cohesive communities and families (United Nations, 2015).

In pursuance of this overarching goal, and coupled with the increase in the interest of societies the world over, English language teaching curricular and pedagogy are being constantly being reshaped not only to improve relevance to the contemporary world, but also as a way of engendering the values and attitudes that are in tandem with the Sustainable Development Goals (Salem, 2013 cited in Akyuz, 2019). To this end, English language programs are being designed to respond to the twin-requirements of developing language within students as well as for preparing students to tackle global issues hence English teachers are increasingly becoming agents of change that mould students into responsible citizens who have the capacity to assume a myriad of identities (Osler, 2005 cited in Akyuz, 2019).

Influence of SDGs on Learning Outcomes of the English Language Programs to Foster Responsible Citizenship

A study carried out in Bangladesh by Amin and Greenwood (2018) on the country's education policy and curriculum vis-à-vis English teaching and learning shows that the influence of SDGs on English language programs is immense. However, challenges were identified that militated against the efficacy of initiatives to mould responsible citizenship in Bangladesh and these included "a number of barriers to effective English teaching, including lack of trained teachers and lack of understanding of the principals of communicative language teaching, failure to use the mandated textbook, overreliance on commercial guide books and teachers' practice of pressuring students to come for private tuition, teachers' low salary, high student numbers, lack of facilities, fear of English, family poverty, absenteeism, and lack of English environment in and outside school" (Amin & Greenwood, 2018, p. 123).

Global citizenship education is part of the United Nations' strategies to mould global citizens and the English language is seen as the catalyst to facilitate this endeavour, although due care is taken to ensure that national identities and diversity are retained (United Nations, 2021b). It aims to empower students with skills for critical and active engagement with the problems and opportunities that confront and come to the world respectively and its nature tends to be "transformative, developing the knowledge and understanding, skills, values, and attitudes that learners need to participate fully in a globalized society and economy and to secure a more just, secure and sustainable world than the one they have inherited" (OXFAM, 2015, p. 5 cited in Akyuz, 2019, p. 1).

Responsible global citizens have the capability to embrace tolerance and English language learning is regarded as a way of propagating good practice and lifting standards across the globe (UN, 2021b; Council of Europe, 2021). For instance, the Council of Europe has – in line with the SDGs – set an ambitious program to ensure that by 2030:

> All learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development (Council of Europe, 2021, p. 1).

In pursuit of the above targets, the Council of Europe's Education Department is using education – including English teaching and learning – to inculcate its values that include human rights, democracy, rule of law, and fighting human rights violations as critical elements in shaping responsible citizens who embrace sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles (Council of Europe, 2021). This new form of education is viewed as "a defence against the rise of violence, racism, extremism, xenophobia, discrimination and intolerance", which 'evils' epitomize the decay of responsible citizenship in the world (Council of Europe, 2021).

Global English language teaching and learning is also being used as a barometer to measure governments' adherence to the promises they made in 2015 when the Sustainable Development Goals were adopted (Sriskandarajah, 2018). It is the duty of responsible citizens to hold their government accountable and innovative ways of upping pressure are done through an accountability revolution that is made possible by English as a global language (Sriskandarajah, 2018). As the former Director General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Irina Bokova, said:

> There is no more powerful transformative force than education – to promote human rights and dignity, to eradicate poverty and deepen sustainability, to build a better future for all, founded on equal rights and social justice, respect for cultural diversity, and international solidarity and shared responsibility, all of which are fundamental aspects of our common humanity (Bokova, n.d. cited in Teach SDGs, n.d.).

SDGs have also pushed through the agenda of intercultural communicative competence as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals makes it imperative for teaching and learning to encompass intercultural understanding (Rader, 2020). By unpacking the social, political, economic and environmental problems that confront mankind, the SDGs implore people of the earth to live and work together harmoniously, equitably and sustainably and this can only be achieved through "respect and appreciation for all forms of diversity, willingness and ability to engage with difference, openness to different ideas and perspectives, the ability to listen well, and a commitment to ensuring human rights and dignity for all" (Rader, 2020, p. 2).

Educators can thus embed components of the intercultural communicative competence model in their lessons to impart intercultural knowledge and other vital skills that promote assimilation, integration, inclusion and connection (Rader, 2020). The attainment of Sustainable Development Goals will only be possible when intercultural communication skills are developed as part of what Nelson, Fowler and Luetz (2019) call "a new kind of literacy for sustainable development" (p. 1). This entails that intercultural education and intercultural competence are critical components of English language teaching and learning as they are determinants in shaping students as responsible citizens since "intercultural competence is part of a family of concepts including global competence, graduate attributes, employability skills,

global citizenship, education for sustainable development and global employability" (Monash, 2017 cited in Nelson et al., 2019, p. 8).

Universities in the United Kingdom, for instance, are promoting intercultural communicative competence skills as a prerequisite for foreign students who wish to study in the country and one such university is the School of Modern Languages at the University of Bristol whose program seeks to develop critical cultural awareness, intercultural attitudes and knowledge as well as to engender intercultural adaptation (Lopez-Rocha & Vailes, 2017).

Opportunities Availed by the SDGs to Synthesize Learning across the Educational Experience in Place-based and Virtual Learning Environments

The Sustainable Development Goals have provided a dossier of opportunities for the synthesizing of educational experience in brick-and-mortar and online learning environments for English teaching and learning. As a result, a number of cross-cutting critical competencies have been identified for attaining all the SDGs, taking into account that "as societies around the world struggle to keep pace with the progress of technology and globalization, they encounter many new challenges... [which] include increasing complexity and uncertainty; more individualization and social diversity; expanding economic and cultural uniformity; degradation of the ecosystem services upon which they depend; and greater vulnerability and exposure to natural and technological hazards" (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017, p. 10).

Sustainable Development Goals, therefore, necessitate the creation of synthesized environments that promote problem solving and action as individuals have to learn to understand the complex world in which they live through collaboration and advocating for change as they become sustainability citizens (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2015; 2017). The global competence that arises from using Sustainable Development Goals in informing English learning and teaching thoroughly prepares the youth in particular for an inclusive and sustainable world (Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development [OECD], n.d.). Furthermore, globally competent people have the capacity to scrutinize local, global and intercultural issues in a more comprehensive manner for them to appreciate various perspectives and world views hence ultimately amassing the skills to "interact successfully and respectfully with others, and take responsible action toward sustainability and collective well-being" (OECD, n.d., p. 4).

SDGs enable English language teaching and learning to integrate global issues as English teachers the world over has responded to the Sustainable Development Goals by spearheading educational change to foster learner autonomy, group work, project work and communication tasks that seek to make English language students active participants and thinkers rather than passive receptacles of knowledge (Szesztay, 2017 in Maley & Peachey, 2017). Language teachers, therefore, use a variety of methods to teach their students attitudes, practices and influence personalities of their students (Maley & Peachey, 2017). This is in line with the observation by the doyen of reflective practice, John Dewey, who opined that:

> Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only what he (or she) is studying at the time. Collateral learning in the way of the formation

of enduring attitudes may be more important than the lesson in geography or history [or English language] for these attitudes are fundamentally what count for the future (Dewey, n.d. cited in Maley & Peachey, 2017, p. 7).

The implication is that collateral learning and other methods of learning that are made necessary by Sustainable Development Goals assist students' learning experiences. One of the areas that have been integrated into English teacher education is the aspect of global citizenship education (GCE) pedagogy and a study carried out by Akyuz (2019) in Turkey revealed that the synthesis of the GCE program into English teacher education pedagogy via the Sustainable Development Goals improved the teachers' levels of global citizenship. Furthermore, schools are increasingly promoting global competence among English students by fostering skills to critically, responsibly and efficaciously utilise digital information technology as well as social media platforms (OECD, n.d.).

The global competence is in turn assessed through two methods, namely a cognitive assessment and a background questionnaire in line with the PISA 2018 Global Competence Assessment, with the cognitive assessment focusing on getting students' capacities of critical examination of global issues and understanding of communication in intercultural settings (OECD, n.d.). The background questionnaire, on the other hand, asks students to narrate the extent of their familiarity with global issues and the development of their linguistic and communication skills and their awareness and respect of cultures which are not theirs (OECD, n.d.). Such assessments have been introduced courtesy of SDGs to measure the extent to which schools are embedding world issues as well as intercultural perspectives in their curriculum, activities and pedagogy (OECD, n.d.).

CONCLUSION

This paper has looked at how Sustainable Development Goals shape English language students' experiences with regards to curricular and co-curricular activities, responsible and global citizenship, global competence, intercultural and communication competences as well as the integration of educational experiences. What has come out of the discussion is that the 17 SDGs are inter-connected and SDG 4 on the promotion of lifelong learning and quality education provides the epoxy that glues all the goals to the wheel of sustainable development. The overall effect of the SDGs on English language learning and teaching has been the transformation of the curricular, pedagogy, policies, practices and world views as the ultimate goal is the creation of globally-competent, inter-culturally-competent and sensitive responsible citizens who embrace respect, sustainability and global harmony in whatever they do.

As the OECD (n.d.) pointed out, a globally-competent student should have the knowledge, values, attitudes and skills that enable him or her to examine local, intercultural and global issues; understand and appreciate perspectives and worldviews of others; engage in open, appropriate and efficacious cross-cultural interactions; and take action for the collective welfare and sustainable development. Sustainable Development Goals have catalysed the metamorphosis of English language teaching such that it now plays a dual role of developing language within students while at the same time preparing students to deal with global issues. In the same labyrinth, English language teachers are assuming the role of change agents as they

shape students into responsible citizens who have the capacity to assume a myriad of identities as true global citizens.

Institutions offering language programs over the world are effectively using Sustainable Development Goals for the students learning English to concentrate on addressing world challenges meaningfully. This is done through training intercultural communicative competence skills, global citizenship education and introducing children to the Global Goals as part of foreign language lesson. The surge in enrolment in primary education in developing countries to 91 percent, for instance, shows that the ideals of education for all by 2030 are on the right track of being achieved and English language teaching and learning continues to be shaped by (and in turn to shape) Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in areas such as good health (SDG 3); gender equality (SDG 5); clean water and sanitation; clean energy; good jobs and economic growth (SDG 8); eradication of poverty (SDG 1); climate action (SDG 13); responsible consumption and production (SDG 12); and infrastructure development (SDG 9), among others (Allam, 2017, United Nations, 2015; Akyuz, 2019; English & Carlsen, 2019).

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